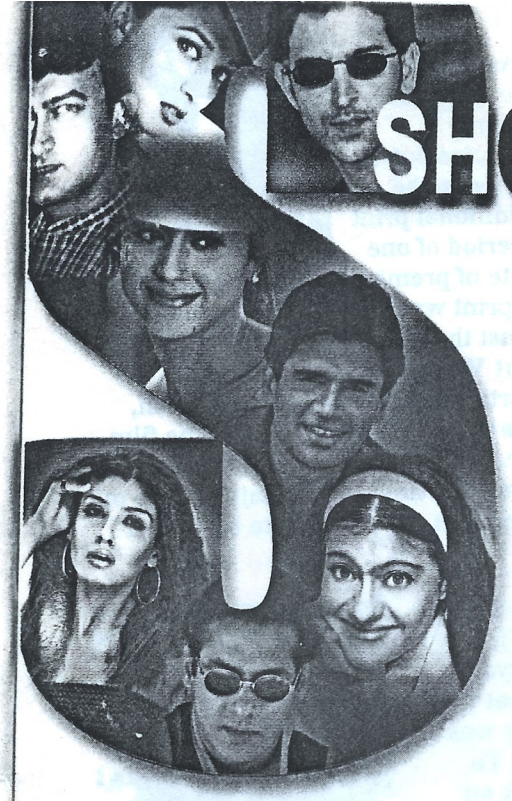


SHOW BIZNESS

The Rise and Rise of Rajshri!

It is no coincidence that Tarachand Barjatya commenced operations of Rajshri Pictures (P.) Ltd. on August 15, 1947 — the day India became free. For, the banner that was born on that auspicious day was to hold Indian values and traditions, more than anything else, at the centre of things. Fifty-four years later, having grown into an empire, Rajshri continues to propagate the same Indian values — whether in its style of doing business or through the films it makes — that Tarachand Barjatya had instilled in the company at the beginning. His three worthy sons, Kamal Kumar, Rajkumar and Ajit Kumar, alongwith grandsons Sooraj and Rajat, have kept the Rajshri flag flying high on the film firmament.

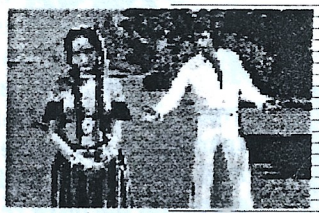
– Tarachand Barjatya

The first fifteen years of Rajshri were spent distributing a number of films, both in Hindi as well as regional languages. By the time Rajshri diversified into film production in 1962, it had cemented its status as the largest film distributor in the country. Today, Rajshri's distribution operates through a network of 24 offices, spanning the length and breadth of India. No other film distributor in the country can even dream of getting anywhere close to Rajshri's infrastructure, not for several years at least.

Rajshri Productions (P.) Ltd. has an enviable record of having produced 47 films in 39 years. The 48th, **Main Prem Ki Diwani Hoon**, starring Hrithik Roshan, Kareena Kapoor and Abhishek Bachchan, is currently under production. The 49th film will start on September 1. What is remarkable about Rajshri's track-record is that the banner has never, even in the worst of circumstances, succumbed to the lure of taking the easy route to the box-office — that of churning out titillating stuff. Be it **Aarti** (1962) , **Dosti** (1964), **Saudagar** (1973), **Geet Gaata Chal** (1975) or the more recent **Maine Pyar Kiya** (1989), **Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!** (1994) or **Hum Saath-Saath Hain** (1999) — every film bears the stamp of Rajshri's unique brand of Indian values. So much so that even the action films made by Rajshri, like **Agent Vinod** (1977) in which Mahendra Sandhu played a Bond-like spy, did not rely on sex to sell. For Rajshri, the primary target audience has always remained the family.

– Sooraj B.

Perhaps, this insistence on making only clean, family entertainers is what pushed Rajshri to major financial



losses in the late seventies and eighties, a period when violence in films ruled. As many as twenty-one Rajshri films flopped at the box-office between '79 and '84, while only three emerged successful. The banner rose like a Phoenix with the arrival of Sooraj Barjatya on the scene with **Maine Pyar Kiya** in '89. Sooraj followed it up with India's biggest blockbuster of all times, **Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!** and the rest, as they say, is history. Incidentally, it was the pragmatic Tarachand Barjatya, respectfully called Sethji, who had been the first to spot potential in Sooraj and place on his young shoulders — he was only 24 then — the immense responsibility of pulling the prestigious banner out of its worst crisis.

To say that Rajshri is the most prestigious banner in the film industry would be stating the obvious. Over the years, it has given to the industry as much as it has got from it, be it in terms of introducing new talent and technology, or new ideas in production and distribution of films. Many of Rajshri's experiments proved successful, while some didn't. But the fact is that others in the industry benefitted a great deal from them. Read on for some of Rajshri's major experiments down the years:

Jeevan Mrityu ('70): Rajshri tried something that had never been done in the history of Hindi cinema — releasing a starcast film in only matinee shows. The Dharmendra starrer, **Jeevan Mrityu** opened in matinee shows at Bombay's Alankar Cinema. The experiment proved successful as the film went on to run for 100 consecutive weeks there.

Chitchor ('76): While a few Hindi films had already been made in the Cinemascope format before it, **Chitchor** was the first that was duly promoted as one. The film's success resulted in more and more films being made in the format. The release of **Chitchor** was another experiment. To prove his dictum 'People would travel miles to see a film which has merit', Tarachand Barjatya released it in only one cinema in a Bombay suburb — and not, as is customary, in any main cinema in the city. Barjatya's belief proved right as **Chitchor** enjoyed an unbroken run of 36 weeks at Amber Cinema in the Bombay suburb of Andheri.

Agent Vinod ('77): The film was released at a time when the government had revised excise duty on cinema prints. As things stood after the revision, 11 prints of a film were exempted from excise duty, after which duty had to be paid on every additional print taken out for a period of one year from the date of premiere release. After one year, every new print was exempted from duty. As if in protest against the levy, Rajshri took out only 11 prints of **Agent Vinod** — an out-and-out commercial entertainer which deserved a much, much wider release. Only after exploiting the film with 11 prints for a year were more prints made. The end result was that not only did Rajshri save on excise duty but the film also went on to become a hit.

Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaaye ('77): Tarachand Barjatya firmly believed that word of mouth publicity was the best publicity. To prove this, he took an unusual step with the release of **Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaaye**. As incredible as it may sound today, the film was released without any street and print publicity! The film, which expectedly took a dismal opening due to lack of promotion, indeed picked up by a favourable word-of-mouth. It ultimately proved to be one of the biggest blockbusters of that year.

Coolie ('83): There was a lot of hype around the time of the release of this Amitabh Bachchan starrer, thanks to the injury he suffered on the sets during its making. The film was produced and directed by Manmohan Desai and distributed by Rajshri in Bombay and a few other territories. It was on the insistence of Gopal Babu, the then general manager of Rajshri, that the shot where Amitabh got hurt was frozen for a few seconds in all the prints. His reasoning was simple: going by the mass hysteria during Amitabh's battle with death, people were extremely sentimental about the incident and very curious to know how he had got hurt. Gopal Babu was 100% correct in his assessment.

Maine Pyar Kiya ('89): Reeling under heavy financial losses due to a string of flops, Tarachand Barjatya placed his hope and trust on his 24-year-old grandson Sooraj to turn things around. The young director lived up to his expectations and delivered a blockbuster on debut. Rajshri introduced 4-track Optical Stereophonic sound for

the first time in India with **Maine Pyar Kiya**. The sound systems at a number of cinemas across the country were upgraded following its success.

Hum Aapke Hain Koun..! ('94): It became a landmark film not only for Rajshri, but also for Indian cinema. Remade from Rajshri's 1982 film, **Nadiya Ke Paar**, **HAHK..!** showed the courageous side of Rajshri. **Nadiya Ke Paar** had been a success only in U.P. and Bihar and a disaster everywhere else. Yet, Rajshri decided to remake the film on a much more grand scale simply because of a strong belief in its subject. Research had shown that **Nadiya Ke Paar** had failed in other territories because of a very strong Bhojpuri flavour — a flaw rectified in **HAHK..!**.

Rajshri had such confidence in **HAHK..!**'s box-office potential that it released the film all-India with only 29 prints in the first week. New prints were added as its run progressed so that ultimately, over 400 prints of the film were in circulation in India alone, in addition to more than 100 abroad. This was because of the supreme confidence in the film. Besides, initially, very few exhibitors would have paid the astronomical terms that Rajshri had in mind for the film. To give just one example of the kind of terms Rajshri thought fit for **HAHK..!**: at a time when the highest collections in a cinema in Bhiwandi (near Bombay) were Rs. 25 lakh, Rajshri's expectation of fixed hire from the cinema was Rs. 1 crore!

Rajshri was so sure of the film's success that it chalked out a year-long contract with Bombay's Liberty Cinema! The contract had to be renewed twice as the film's run outlived it each time. Rajshri also had the cinema renovated at its own cost, complete with special lighting fitted around the screen. The colourful lights came on during some of the songs and gave the audience a feeling of being at a **shaadi ka mandap**! The film is said to have earned a share of Rs. 2.75 crore from Liberty alone!

For the same film, it was Rajshri which, alongwith Liberty cinema of Bombay, filed a writ petition in the Bombay high court, demanding the right to increase admission rates without prior permission of the collector/ licensing authority. The Maharashtra government fought tooth and nail against the plea for enhanced rates without permission, but the high court ruled in favour of Rajshri and Liberty cinema. It is because of this landmark ruling that we now see cinemas in Maharashtra changing admission rates according to the film screened and also for the same film on different days of the week.

Hum Saath-Saath Hain ('99): In contrast to the limited print release of **HAHK..!**, Rajshri flooded the market with an exceptionally large number of prints of **Hum Saath-Saath Hain**. The film opened in a record 416 cinema halls across India. This was also a clever strategy, considering that pirated VCDs of the film surfaced in the first week itself. Also, the wide release proved to be a boon because the film turned out somewhat below the usual expectations of a Sooraj Barjatya film. A large number of prints on release meant that the film was able to cover more than its cost in the initial few weeks alone, before the collections began dropping.

The one experiment that failed....: By the late seventies, Rajshri had developed a vast network of distribution offices across the country. Rajshri then expanded its production activities in a big way. The banner produced as many as seven films in '79 and six films in '80, a total of 13, of which only **Taraana** and **Saawan Ko Aane Do** proved to be successful. Resultantly, Rajshri slowed down its production activities in the subsequent years: It made only one film in '81, four in '82, three each in '83 and '84 and only one each in '85 and '86. When the drought of hits continued, Rajshri didn't produce a single film in '87 and '88. Its next production was **Maine Pyar Kiya** in 1989. If anything, Rajshri's failed experiment proved the fact that an assembly-line approach can never work in a highly creative field as film-making. Not till one can give enough time to all the projects.

— GAUTAM MUTHA & RAJ VAIDYA